

Parshat Emor. May 17, 2025, Iyyar 19, 5785

TORAH READING Leviticus 21:1-24:23

Lucy Steinitz

Parashat Emor, the 31st weekly Torah portion, focuses on the holiness of both time and people, particularly concerning the priests and the calendar of sacred festivals. It outlines laws regarding priestly behavior, including marriage restrictions and prohibitions against contact with the dead. The parashah also details the festivals of the Jewish year, including the Sabbath, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the Pilgrimage Festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

I want to focus on the holidays, and on the question of, “How does a Jewish holiday become a Jewish holiday?” And what do we mean by holiday?

Holidays are different than personal milestones like marriage, death, the onset of menstruation, and of course, Bar and Bat mitzva. Basically, a Jewish holiday is a public celebration that occurs annually, the same date for everyone. A Jewish holiday becomes a holiday through a process of recognition and observance within the Jewish community and sometimes by government entities. Many Jewish holidays have pre-Jewish roots that helped the early Jews absorb the occasion, while endowing it with new meaning.

For example, the pre-biblical background to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, suggests it may have been inspired by the Babylonian festival Akitu, which involved a king's entrance into the sanctuary on a specific day. Similarly, our celebrations of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot were set aside in biblical times for people to travel to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. These holidays are still known as harvest festivals and have as much rootedness in the agricultural cycle of ancient Israel as they do in the Biblical events that we now attribute to them.

Jewish holidays are rooted in centuries of tradition, memory, and meaning. They mark historic events, spiritual insights, agricultural cycles, and moral values. Since the time of this parasha, we have added many new Jewish holidays to the calendar, mostly commemorations of historical events like the Shoah or the founding of the State of Israel 77 years ago.

From the joy of Purim to the solemnity of Yom Kippur, each holiday invites individual reflection and connection to the Jewish people or tribe. Thus, to invent a new Jewish holiday would not merely be an act of creativity – it's a deeply respectful engagement with heritage, values, and community.

The first step in inventing a Jewish holiday is understanding the values that underpin Jewish tradition: values of remembrance (*zachor*), repair (*tikkun olam*), gratitude (*hakarat hatov*), and community (*kehilla*). I would venture to say that every holiday should fulfill at least 3 of these values, if not all four. To me, this is very important. Also, a successful holiday must not feel foreign to the Jewish soul – it must echo something already present in Jewish thought and life, even if it's been unspoken or under-celebrated. Finally, it must feel relevant, as measured by personal experience, faith in God, or our sense of history and the role Jews play in the world.

So, my question to you today will be: **How might you invent a Jewish holiday? What is missing by way of celebration or commemoration?** To get you started, I'll propose two new ones, simply as examples.

I am calling the first one, *Yom HaTikvah* – “The Day of Hope.” *Yom HaTikvah* would embody the value of hope and resilience – core themes in Jewish history, often overshadowed by the heavier focus on persecution and survival. This holiday would celebrate the Jewish people's continuity, adaptability, and desire to dream, rebuild, and renew across millennia.

Every Jewish holiday also contains specific rituals, as we have learned. I had to ask myself, what might be the way to express our celebration of *Yom HaTikvah*?

- **We could light a very tall, single candle** at sundown to symbolize the flame of hope.
- **We could read a poem or some stories** of Jewish perseverance and creativity— from the Warsaw Ghetto's secret schools to Ethiopian Jews' journey to Israel.
- **We might write personal hopes** for the future and place them in a communal “Hope Box,” to be read the following year.
- **We could dance or sing songs** about faith and future— drawing from different Jewish cultures around the world, and perhaps ending with *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem.

- **And of course, we should share in a celebratory meal** – there *must* be food - for example, food that incorporates symbolic meaning: sprouting greens (renewal), honey (sweetness), and homemade bread (sustenance).

I am not suggesting *Yom HaTikvah* in real life, though I love the sentiment of it.

Another option I read about – equally a good idea in my opinion – might be a holiday that emphasizes our unity as a people – let’s tentatively call it *Yom Achdut* ("Day of Unity"). One suggestion I read is that such a holiday could be observed annually on a date situated between Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the Torah, and Tisha B’Av, which mourns the destruction caused by division among Jews. Positioned here, *Yom Achdut* would symbolically bridge revelation and reconciliation, inviting communities to reflect on the strength found in diversity. We might combine plants to create a symbolic Tree of Life, with a mixture of grasses, flowers, and small branches. Again, this holiday should include a festive meal, with sample cuisine from Jewish communities around the world.

A celebration of unity - of inclusion - within Judaism would be great, in fact. From the Jews of Ethiopia to the Bene Israel of India, from Sephardi traditions in Morocco to Ashkenazi life in Eastern Europe, Jewish identity has never been monolithic. In modern times, Jewish communities also include converts, multiracial families, LGBTQ+ individuals, differently abled Jews, and those with varying levels of observance and belief. Unfortunately, this diversity has not always been fully embraced. There remain structural and cultural barriers in some Jewish institutions that can leave certain groups feeling marginalized. Therefore, a holiday devoted to unity and inclusion - a *Yom Achdut* - would help dismantle these barriers by promoting visibility, education, and dialogue.

There are lots of possibilities. I am not suggesting any particular new Jewish holiday, just the IDEA of a new one: **pick your theme and run with it.** The next step is up to you, which brings me back to original question for this week: **If you could add one more holiday to the annual Jewish calendar**, what would it be?